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One Minute to Doomsday

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In October 1962, the Soviet Union, Cuba and United States came to the verge of military conflict and brought the world to the brink of nuclear disaster. None intended to create such risk. To understand what caused the crisis and how to avoid such risks, participants in the events have convened several times.

A meeting in Havana in January was the fifth. By the third meeting, in Moscow in January 1989, it had become clear that each nation's decisions immediately before and during the crisis had been distorted by misinformation, miscalculation and misjudgment. Here are four of many examples.

First, before Soviet missiles were introduced into Cuba in the summer of 1962, the Soviet Union and Cuba believed the U.S. intended to invade, overthrow Fidel Castro and remove his Government. We had no such intention. Second, the U.S. believed the Soviets would not move nuclear warheads outside the Soviet Union — they never had — but they did. Third, the Soviets believed the missiles could be secretly introduced and that when their presence was disclosed, the U.S. would not respond. Here, too, they erred. (On Oct. 14, we spotted the missiles for the first time.) Fourth, those who urged John F. Kennedy to destroy the missiles by an air attack, which likely would have been followed by a sea and land invasion, were almost certainly mistaken in their belief that the Soviets would not respond with military action.

At the time, the C.I.A. had reported 10,000 Soviet troops in Cuba. At the Moscow conference, participants were told there were 43,000 and 270,000 well-armed Cuban troops. Both forces, their commanders said, would "fight to the death." The Cubans estimated 100,000 casualties. The Soviets expressed disbelief that we would have thought that, catastrophically defeated, they would not have responded militarily somewhere in the world; there would have been a high risk of uncontrollable escalation.

In Moscow, we drew two major lessons. First, that in this age of high-technology weapons, crisis management is dangerous, difficult and uncertain. Therefore, we must direct our attention to avoiding crises. At a minimum, avoidance requires that potential adversaries take great care to try to understand how the other party will interpret their actions.

> The Cuban missile crisis — blind vs. blind.

Opening the meeting, Mikhail Gorbachev's aide, Georgi Shaknazarov, asked me, as a member of President Kennedy's executive committee during the crisis, to ask the first question. I said: "What was the purpose of the deployment of the nuclear-tipped missiles into Cuba?" Andrei Gromyko, Foreign Minister in 1962, responded: "Their action was intended to strengthen the defensive stability of Cuba. To avert the threats against it. I repeat, to strengthen the defensive capability of Cuba. That is all."

I replied, in part: "My first comment is stimulated by the implication of Mr. Gromkyo's answer — that the U.S. intended, prior to the emplacement of missiles, to invade Cuba. If I had been a Cuban leader, I might have expected a U.S. invasion. We had authorized the Bay of Pigs invasion. We did not support it militarily — and that should be recognized and emphasized, as it was specifically the decision of President Kennedy not to support the operation with the use of U.S. military force — but we had assisted in carrying it out.

"Secondly, there were U.S. covert operations in Cuba extending over a long period of time. The Cubans knew that. And, thirdly, there were important leaders of our Senate, our House, who were calling for the invasion. But we had absolutely no intention of invading Cuba, and therefore the Soviet action to install missiles with that as its objective was based on a misconception — a clearly understandable one that we in part were responsible for."

Some of us believed the U.S. faced great danger during the missile crisis. In Havana, we learned we had greatly underestimated that danger. The Russians told us the Soviet forces in Cuba possessed 36 nuclear warheads for the 24 intermediate-range missiles targeted on U.S. cities. At the time, the C.I.A. stated it did not believe there were any nuclear warheads there.

We were also told there were six dual-purpose tactical launchers supported by nine tactical missiles with nuclear warheads to be used against a U.S. invasion force. We were informed that the authority to use those tactical nuclear warheads had been delegated to the Soviet field commanders in Cuba. We need not speculate about what would have happened had a U.S. attack been launched, as many in the U.S. Government, military and civilians alike, were recommending to the President. We can predict the results with certainty.

Although the U.S. forces would not have been accompanied by tactical nuclear warheads, no one should believe that had U.S. troops been attacked with nuclear warheads, the U.S. would have refrained from responding with nuclear warheads. Where it would it have ended? In utter disaster.

The missile crisis is replete with examples of misinformation, misjudgment, miscalculation. Such errors are costly in conventional war. When they affect decisions relating to nuclear forces, they can result in the destruction of nations. This must lead to the conclusion that, insofar as it is achievable, we should seek to return to a non-nuclear world. □

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